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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001337

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/SINGH

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TAGS: KDEM PINS PHUM PREL SY LE

SUBJECT: MGLE01: DEFEATED LEBANESE CLOSE TO SYRIA ORGANIZE
FOR A COMEBACK

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Section 1.4(b)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Elie Ferzli, former Minister of Information and apologist for Syrian influence in Lebanon, is working to form a political "movement" with other like-minded politicians such as Former Interior Minister Suleiman Franjieh, and Former PM Omar Karame. PolChief met with Ferzli, former Minister of Defense Abdul-Rahim Murad, and, separately, Franjieh to discuss their plans and the timing of their announcement. The plan appeared to be to constitute a group of elder statesmen who would launch press attacks on the Hariri-led march 14 group, and if need be, from the street. The new group will be an extra-parliamentary opposition and lobbying group combined. All of the new partisans of Ferzli's group share with him an intimate relationship with Syria and electoral failures in the 2005 elections. The appearance of this new group is being pointed to by some as more confirmation of continued Syrian influence in Lebanese affairs.

FRANJIEH--EVERYONE IS LOOKING OUT FOR THEMSELVES;
ONLY I AM LOOKING OUT FOR ME

¶2. (C) Suleiman Franjieh, the unashamed pro-Syrian of the north, was statesmanlike as he spoke to Poloff about his plans for the future. Faced with the failure of the national dialogue, he said, and President Lahoud's continued presence, it was his patriotic duty to act. He plans to join others in forming a kind of extra-parliamentary opposition to the present government that will offer alternatives to the plans of Saad Hariri. Franjieh did not speak of PM Siniora and the government, but of Hariri and his clan. The people who are running Lebanon today have failed, Franjieh said. He, and others, intend to point out these failings so the Lebanese people can see the truth. Among the egregious failings of the government was the new election law proposal, that Franjieh had not seen, which divided Lebanon into inequitable districts leaving the Christians powerless to influence the selection of their deputies. He labeled the economic reform a collection of discredited ideas left over from Rafiq Hariri. Franjieh said that the Siniora plan will result in more taxes for the poor and profits for the rich as they exploit the privatization of public utilities such as the cell phone companies. He questioned the need for privatization of any companies that remained profitable. All these plans were little more than profit-making scams

run by Walid Jumblatt and his deputy Marwan Hamade, Franjieh said.

¶13. (C) Franjieh intends to carry the fight to the government. He plans to form his own political party, separate of the other opposition formations, to represent the interests of Christians in the north. When asked if FPM leader Michel Aoun no longer represented his interests, Franjieh rushed to say he would support Aoun with his own new party. But he felt the specific interests of his own people would be better represented through him. Franjieh explained that he received a significant portion of the popular vote in the 2005 elections. That result is evidence of his leadership. The only reason he is not in parliament, he insisted, is because of an unfair election law. For Franjieh, one of the most alarming developments recently is the election law proposal from the national electoral law commission. Franjieh is convinced that any law that is passed by the present parliament would be engineered to support Hariri and his forces to the detriment of all other voices in the country.

¶14. (C) At the same time, Franjieh was adamant that the only solution for Lebanon's present political malaise was a new election law followed by new parliamentary elections. He predicted that new elections would bring a new president. Short of new elections, Franjieh said the only solution to the present stalemate would be agreement that Aoun become president and replace Emile Lahoud at once. With neither a new law, nor a new president, Franjieh said the country would be frozen for the next year, awaiting the end of extended Lahoud's term. In the meantime, Hariri would have his way with the state and its resources.

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FERZLI--HARIRI HAS BEEN MAKING A MESS OF THINGS LONG ENOUGH--NOW IT IS OUR TURN

¶15. (C) Elie Ferzli and Abdul-Rahim Murad, both based in Lebanon's Biqa'a valley, said they were prepared to take to the street in protest of what they described as the Siniora government's terrible record. Like Franjieh, they see the government as a tool of Saad Hariri's, used to reinforce his control of Lebanon's institutions. The only way out of the coming disaster is the new political formation that Ferzli is planning along with other like-minded political outsiders. "Other voices must be heard." When asked about the timing of his initiative, Ferzli said he and the others had given the new government a grace period after the elections. Now, they all agreed that the time was right for them to step in. "Stepping in" means being openly critical of the government when it makes a mistake. The former Minister said the only solution for Lebanon would be to nullify all laws passed under what Ferzli called the old regime, including the election law, the results of the 2005 elections, and the extension of President Lahoud. Then, parliament and the government would be dissolved and a new election held. Although he was not clear on how such a solution could be arrived at, Ferzli insisted that all was possible. He said that he and his new movement would support the Aoun parliamentary-opposition and make it stronger through their support. However, he could not contemplate joining the Free Patriotic Movement led by Aoun. "We all have our own special interests," Ferzli said.

¶16. (C) Ferzli also wants to counter what he sees as the outrageous media campaigns that some in Lebanon have aimed at Syria and at those who oppose Hariri's power play in Lebanon. "I will wager the others are already calling us pro-Syrians," Ferzli said. He listed incidents in the Lebanese press, in which Lebanese officials verbally attacked Syrian President Asad, saying that these attacks

strengthen Asad. But Syria is neither the inspiration nor the support for Ferzli's new movement, he insisted. He and his cohorts had taken a decision not to go to Syria before his group launched its manifesto, Ferzli said proudly. Murad added that he normally traveled once a month to Syria where he has business interests. But after local reporters labeled him pro-Syrian, he doubled his visits. Those visits, according to Murad, have included interviews with the Syrian press in which he challenges the Asad regime and criticizes their doings in Lebanon. They know me and they publish my criticisms," he pronounced.

¶ 7. (C) Ferzli said he and his partners intended to be constructive in their criticism of the government. His colleague Murad launched into a long list of grievances against the Hariri-led March 14th movement, citing everything from minor graft and influence-peddling to complicity in the looting of public monies. Murad said that Hariri and his fellow March 14 partisans had polarized the country, weakened its institutions, and made Lebanon fertile ground for Sunni extremism. After listing the woes of Lebanon, Murad told Poloff that he and his fellow travelers welcomed any initiative designed to help Lebanon, be it Saudi, Egyptian or American. Because, Murad said, the Lebanese cannot be expected to reach a solution themselves. The former Minister of Defense blamed Hariri for this Lebanese helplessness; "he has the power to corrupt any Lebanese process."

FELTMAN